

On the Brightness of the Light

(*Kōmyō*)

Translator’s Introduction: The word ‘*kōmyō*’ has various meanings in this discourse. It refers to a sort of light, or ‘glow’, which can be seen in someone for whom the clouds of spiritual ignorance have dispersed. However, it also refers to that which underlies this manifestation: the shining forth of one’s Buddha Nature both spiritually and physically. It also refers to the functioning of one’s innate wise discernment. Hence, in this translation it is rendered in a variety of ways, depending on the immediate context: (physical) brightness, luminosity, glow, (spiritual) Brightness, and the Light.

Certain sections of this discourse may prove puzzling to some readers. Confusion may arise because Dōgen moves easily back and forth between referring to the brightness as a physical manifestation and the Brightness as a spiritual manifestation. Sometimes he means them both simultaneously. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the Eastern Quarter. A similar and more complex situation arises in regard to the *kōan* story of Meditation Master Ummon, where the practice of monks is likened to monastery buildings.

Great Master Chōsa Keishin of Hunan Province in Great Sung China, while addressing his assembly during a Dharma talk, once said:

The whole universe in all ten directions is a mendicant monk’s Eye.

The whole universe in all ten directions is a mendicant monk’s everyday speech.

The whole universe in all ten directions is a mendicant monk’s whole body.

The whole universe in all ten directions is the brightness of one’s own being.

The whole universe in all ten directions resides within the brightness of one’s own being.

In the whole universe in all ten directions there is not even one person who is not his, or her, own being.

Our exploration of the words and ways of Buddhas through our practice with a Master must, by all means, be done with diligence. We must not become more and more casual and neglect it, for it is due to just such neglectfulness that teachers in

the past who gained an understanding of what spiritual Brightness is were rare indeed.

Emperor Kao-ming of the Later Han dynasty in China—his forbidden name was Chuang and his name at entombment was Emperor Hsein-tsung¹—was the fourth princely son of Emperor Kuang-wu. In the tenth year of the Eihei era (67 C.E.), during the reign of Emperor Kao-ming, two Indian monks, Kashapamātanga and Dharmaraksha by name, were the first to introduce Buddhist Teachings into China. In front of a platform that had been set up as a place to burn their copies of the Sutras if they lost, the two monks defeated the heretical followers of the Taoists through argument, thereby exhibiting the spiritual powers of Buddhas.

Later, in the Chinese P'u-tung era (520-527), during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, our First Ancestor, Bodhidharma himself, traveled from India to Kuangchou Province in South China. He was the legitimate heir to the genuine Transmission of the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching. He was the twenty-eighth Dharma descendant from Shakyamuni Buddha. Subsequently, he was permitted to hang up his traveling staff at Shōrin-ji Monastery on a remote mountain peak at the foot of Mount Sūzan. He authentically Transmitted the Dharma to the Second Ancestor, our Great Ancestral Meditation Master Eka, who personally experienced the brightness of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Before that time, there was no one who had personally seen, or even heard of, the Brightness of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Much less did any of them recognize their own brightness. Even if they had encountered that brightness, bringing it forth from the crown of their own head, they did not explore it with their own Eye. As a result, they did not clarify whether the brightness was long or short, square or round, nor did they clarify whether the brightness was curling up or spreading out, tightening or loosening. Because they felt uncomfortable about encountering the Brightness, their brightness became more and more estranged from Brightness. Even though this estrangement was itself an aspect of the Brightness, it was obstructed by the estrangement.

Stinking skin bags* who have become more and more estranged from their Brightness—and their brightness—hold views and theories like the following, “A Buddha’s light, as well as our own brightness, must be red, white, blue, or yellow, like the light from a fire or light shimmering upon water, or like the luster of a

1. In ancient China, emperors had a name that was for their use alone and, while the emperor was alive, no one, under penalty of death, was permitted to use that name as part of their own.

* See *Glossary*.

pearl or the sparkle of a jewel, or like the light from a dragon or a celestial being, or like the light of sun and moon.” Although folks such as these may sometimes be following a spiritually good teacher or what the Scriptures say, when they hear words of Teaching concerning brightness, they imagine it to be like the light of a firefly. This cannot be considered as exploring the Matter* with a Master by means of using their own heads and eyes. From the Han dynasty through the Sui, T’ang, and Sung dynasties down to the present day, such outpourings of opinions have been many indeed. This is why you should not study under scholastic Dharma teachers or pay attention to the questionable theories put forth by such teachers of meditation.



What is called ‘the Brightness of the Buddhas and Ancestors’ is the whole universe in all ten directions; It is the whole of Buddhas and the whole of Ancestors; It is each Buddha on His own, as well as all Buddhas; It is the light of Buddha; It is the Buddha illumined. Buddhas and Ancestors treat Buddhas and Ancestors as Brightness. Training with and awakening to this Brightness, They become Buddha, They sit as Buddha, and They realize Buddhahood. This is why it is said that this Light has illumined eighteen thousand Buddha lands in the Eastern Quarter.²

This is the Light that is talked about in *kōan** stories. This Light is the Light of Buddha. What illumines the Eastern Quarter is the luminosity of the eastern quarter. The Eastern Quarter is something other than what conventional people discuss as some ‘here’ or ‘there’. It is the very heart of the Dharma Realm and the very middle of the Fist. Even though the phrase ‘the eastern quarter’ puts limitations on the Eastern Quarter, it is a veritable half-pound of brightness. Through your training, you need to explore the point that the Eastern Quarter exists in this land of ours, that the Eastern Quarter exists in other lands, and that the Eastern Quarter exists in the eastern quarter. In the term ‘eighteen thousand’, ‘ten thousand’ means ‘half a Fist’ and ‘half of this very heart and mind of ours’.³ It does

-
2. The Eastern Quarter is the spiritual realm of Akshobya Buddha.
 3. In the Chinese and Japanese counting systems, ‘eighteen thousand’ is written with three characters that could be read as ‘(one unit of) ten thousand and eight units of one thousand’. Thus, since ‘eighteen thousand’ represents the whole of the Fist and the whole of our being, the phrase ‘(one unit of) ten thousand’, as half of the whole expression, represents half the Fist and half of this very heart and mind of ours. In other words, half of the whole is half of the Whole.

not always mean ‘ten units of one thousand’, nor does it mean, say, ‘ten thousand units of ten thousand’ or ‘a hundred units of ten thousand’. ‘Buddha lands’ refers to what is inside our eyes.⁴ When we see or hear the phrase ‘what illumines the Eastern Quarter’, if we study it as if it were some white band of cloth extending in just one direction across the eastern sky, this will not be a case of our exploring the Way through our training. The whole universe in all ten directions is, simply, the Eastern Quarter, so we call the Eastern Quarter ‘the whole universe in all ten directions’. On this basis, the whole universe in all ten directions exists. When the phrase ‘the whole universe in all ten directions’ is uttered, we hear the phrase ‘eighteen thousand Buddha lands’ being voiced.



Emperor Hsien-tsung of the T’ang dynasty was the imperial father of two emperors, Mu-tsung and Hsüan-tsung, and was the grandfather of three emperors, Ching-tsung, Wen-tsung, and Wu-tsung. Once, when he requested that the ashes of the Buddha be brought to him so that he could make an alms offering to them, they gave off a light that illumined the night. The emperor was overjoyed. Early the next morning, his retainers and ministers all presented congratulatory letters which said, “It is the Saintly responding to His Majesty’s saintly virtue.”

At that time there was a minister, Han Yu Wen-kung by name—he was also called Tui-chih. He was in the habit of exploring the Matter whilst sitting in the back row of the Buddhist Ancestors. Wen-kung alone did not offer a congratulatory letter. Emperor Hsien-tsung asked him, “All the other retainers and ministers have offered our royal presence a congratulatory letter. Why have you not done so?”

Wen-kung replied, “Your humble servant has seen in Buddhist writings that the Light of Buddha is not something blue or yellow or red or white, so the present light must simply be the glow from some guardian dragon.”

The emperor then asked, “Then what, pray tell, is the Buddha’s light like?”

Wen-kung did not reply.

Now, even though this Wen-kung is said to have been just an ordinary fellow in lay life, nevertheless he had the spirit of a stout-hearted trainee in the Way who had the

4. That is, it refers to our own being when we look within ourselves.

ability to set the heavens and the earth a-spinning. Should any people undertake to explore the Matter through their training, this is the beginning attitude of mind that they should have. If they do not approach their study in this manner, they are apart from the Way. Even if flowers were to rain down upon them from the heavens when they were lecturing on the Scriptures, still their efforts would be in vain if they had not yet arrived at this principle in training. Even if they were among the ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’,* if they were to keep their long tongues in their mouths the same as Wen-kung did his, that would be evidence of their giving rise to the desire to realize the Truth and of their giving rise to training and enlightenment.⁵

Be that as it may, there is something in Buddhist writings that you, Han Wen-kung, have still not encountered or heard about. How have you understood the saying, “The Light of Buddha is not something blue or yellow or red or white?” If you had the ability to grasp the fact that, when someone looks at a light that is blue, yellow, red, or white, it is not the Light of Buddha, then, when you see the Light of Buddha, you must refrain from considering It from the perspective of Its being something blue, yellow, red, or white. If Emperor Hsien-tsung had been a Buddhist Ancestor, he would have pursued the Matter in this way.

In short, the Light that is ever so clear is the luminosity of all the hundreds of things that sprout up like blades of grass, without anything being added to, or taken away from, their roots, stems, branches, leaves, fruit, glow, or color. There is the luminosity of the five paths, and there is the luminosity of the six paths.⁶ Since these are the very places where the What exists, would that explain what light is and what brightness is? Surely, it must be describing how the great earth with its mountains and rivers suddenly came into existence. We need to explore in detail the saying by Master Chōsa that the whole universe in all ten quarters is our own brightness. We need to explore that Self which is the Brightness as being the whole universe in all ten quarters.

The coming and going of birth and death is the coming and going of one’s brightness; going beyond the mundane and transcending the holy are the indigo and vermilion of that Brightness; becoming a Buddha and becoming an Ancestor are the black and yellow of that Brightness. Training and enlightenment are not apart from It, for they are what color the Brightness is. Grasses and trees, walls and

5. Long tongues are representative of the ability to eloquently voice the Dharma.

6. ‘The five paths’ refers to the five worlds of existence: namely, that of celestial beings, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. The six paths are the five paths plus existence in the world of asuras.

fences, as well as skin, flesh, bones, and marrow are the scarlet and white of the Brightness. Smoke and mist, water and stones, as well as the path of birds and the hidden road, are the twists and turns of the Brightness. Experiencing one's own Brightness is the mutual encounter of meeting and recognizing a Buddha. The whole universe in all ten directions is one's true Self, and one's true Self is the whole universe in all ten directions—there is no place to escape to. Were there some way to escape this, it could only be by getting outside of our own physical body. Our present-day seven feet of skull and bones is precisely the form and image of the whole universe in all ten directions. Indeed, the whole universe in all ten directions which trains and enlightens us in the Buddha's Way is our skull and bones, our physical body with its skin, flesh, bones, and marrow.



Great Master Ummon Bun'en was a descendant of the thirty-ninth generation from the World-honored Tathagata. He was the Dharma heir of Great Master Seppō Shinkaku. Even though he was a latecomer to training among the Buddha's followers, he is a hero within our Ancestral lineage. Who could assert that a luminous Buddha had never emerged on Mount Ummon?

There was a time when Ummon entered the Dharma Hall and addressed his assembly, saying, "All human beings, without exception, have the Light within themselves. But when they look for It, they do not see It, for It is shrouded in the darkness of ignorance. Just what is this Light that everyone has within themselves?" There was no one in his assembly who gave a reply. Putting himself in their place, he said, "The Monks' Hall, the Buddha Hall, the Temple Kitchen, and the Gate to the Mountain."⁷

The present statement of the Great Master that all human beings, without exception, have the Light within themselves is not saying that It is something that will manifest at some time in the future, or that It was something that existed in some past generation, or that It is something that is fully manifesting Itself in front of some onlooker now. We need to clearly hear and remember his statement that all human beings, without exception, have the Light within themselves. This Light amasses hundreds of thousands of Ummons, helping them train together and say

7. 'The Gate to the Mountain' is a common term for the entrance to a monastery. The whole of Ummon's statement could also be translated as "the Monks' Hall, the Buddha Hall, and the Temple Kitchen as the gateways to the monastery."

the same thing as with one voice. Ummon is not dragging this statement out from himself: it is the brightness of all human beings that takes up the Light and speaks these words for the sake of everyone. “All human beings, without exception, have the Light within themselves” is equivalent to saying, “The whole of humanity itself is what has the Brightness.” The Brightness is what all human beings are. Taking hold of this Brightness, they turn It into external conditions and internal tendencies. Thus, we can say, “The Brightness is what totally possesses all human beings,” or “Each Light is each and every human being,” or “All human beings, by nature, have within themselves each and every human being,” or “Each moment of Light, by nature, contains every moment of Light,” or “Each instance of possession totally possesses every instance of possession,” or “Each moment of totality contains every moment of totality.” So, be aware that the Brightness that each human being completely possesses is what every human being fully manifests, and the Brightness is each individual human being, which each individual brightness completely possesses.

Now, I would like to ask Ummon, “What is it that you are calling ‘each and every human being’? What is this thing you call ‘Light?’” Ummon himself had said, “Just what is this Light that everyone has within themselves?” This question is the very brightness itself, and any doubt will kill the conversation. Even so, when such a matter is being raised, every human being that is present will be an individual instance of Light.

At the time, there was no one in his assembly who gave a reply. Even though they all had hundreds of thousands of answers, they spoke by means of not making a reply. This condition is the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana, which is the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, and which all the Buddhas and Ancestors authentically Transmit.

Ummon, putting himself in the place of his assembly, said,
“The Monks’ Hall, the Buddha Hall, the Temple Kitchen, and the
Three Gates.”⁸

8. From this point on in the discourse, Dōgen cites the Gate to the Mountain by an alternative name: the Three Gates (both names are read as *sammon* in Japanese). This shift in names carries an implication that each person who undertakes the training (enters the Gate to the Monastery) encounters the three principle areas of life in a monastery: the Monks’ Hall (where one does meditation), the Buddha Hall (where one hears the Teaching), and the Temple Kitchen (where one carries out the ordinary tasks of everyday life). Since these areas of activity are also going on within the trainee, to that extent the trainee is the Monastery. In

The present statement, “putting himself in the place of,” means putting himself in the place of Ummon, putting himself in the place of his great assembly, putting himself in the place of the brightness, and putting himself in the place of the Monks’ Hall, the Buddha Hall, the Temple Kitchen, and the Gate to the Monastery. But what did Ummon mean by referring to the Three Gates of the Monks’ Hall, the Buddha Hall, and the Temple Kitchen? We ought not to call a great assembly, along with every human being in it, the Three Gates of the Monks’ Hall, the Buddha Hall, and the Temple Kitchen. After all, how many Three Gates of the Monks’ Hall, Buddha Hall, and Temple Kitchen are there? Should we regard them all as Ummon? Or as the Seven Buddhas?* Or as the twenty-eight Indian Ancestors? Or as the first six Chinese Ancestors? Or as the Fist? Or as the Nose? Even though the Three Gates of the Monks’ Hall, Buddha Hall, and Temple Kitchen are, so to speak, any Buddha or Ancestor, Buddhas and Ancestors are persons who do not escape from being human beings. And they go beyond just being ‘a human being’. Once they have become ‘such a one’,* there are instances where there are Buddha Halls that have no Buddha and where there are no Buddha Halls that lack Buddha. There are Buddhas who have luminosity and there are Buddhas who do not have luminosity. There is a luminosity without Buddha and there is a luminosity with Buddha.



Great Master Seppō once addressed his assembly, saying, “I have fully recognized you all before the Monks’ Hall.” This was said at a time when Seppō’s whole being, through and through, was his Eye. It was an occasion when Seppō caught a glimpse of the true Seppō. It was a Monks’ Hall recognizing a Monks’ Hall.

Hōfuku, alluding to his Master’s remark, asked Gako,⁹ “Putting aside his ‘before the Monks’ Hall’ for the moment, where is it that Bōshū Pavilion and Useki Peak recognize each other?”¹⁰ Thereupon, Gako sped back to the Abbot’s quarters, whereas Hōfuku straightaway entered the Monks’ Hall. In the present instance, the one’s returning to the Abbot’s quarters and the other’s entering the Monks’ Hall are both ways of expressing their having left self behind. It is a

this sense what Ummon is saying could be translated as “The Monks’ Hall, the Buddha Hall, and the Temple Kitchen are the Three Gates.”

9. Hōfuku and Gako were two of Seppō’s disciples.

10. Bōshū Pavilion and Useki Peak are two scenic places on Mount Seppō that were used as meditation sites.

principle based on mutual recognition. It is two Monks' Halls mutually recognizing each other.¹¹



Great Master Jizō Keichin once said, “The Chief Cook has entered the Kitchen Hall.” This expression of his has put the Matter before the Seven Buddhas.

Delivered to the assembly at Kannondōri Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple on a summer night during the fourth period of the third watch of the second day of the sixth lunar month in the third year of the Ninji era (about 2:00 A.M., July 1, 1242). At that time during the wet season, the rain was pouring down, the drops gushing off the eaves. Where was the brightness to be found then? My great assembly has still not escaped from having been pierced to the heart by what Ummon said.

Copied by me in the office of the Abbot's assistant at Daibutsu-ji Temple in Echizen Province on the third day of the twelfth lunar month in the second year of the Kangen era (January 1, 1245).

Ejō

11. That is, both having awakened to the Truth and having recognized this awakening in each other, the one goes to the Abbot's quarters (a symbolic Bōshū Pavilion) for spiritual confirmation and instruction, and the other goes to the Monks' Hall (a symbolic Useki Peak) to continue his training through meditation.